Painting a Tragedy

Young Children Process the Events of September 11

Toni Gross and Sydney Gurewitz Clemens

When I [Tony] heard that the Twin Towers and Pentagon had been attacked, I called upon all my resources so as to come to the children in good condition to help them through the horror. Early on the morning of September 11, I telephoned Sydney. I had read her article about talking with children during a crisis, "Talking about the News with 3- to 7-Year-Olds" (Clemens 1998). I wanted a jolt of courage from Sydney, and a reminder of the salient points of the article to help me handle what I knew would be a subject that both parents and other teachers might fear would be too frightening for children to deal with and something the children might not feel safe to talk about at our child care center. Sydney told me she'd rewrite the article and e-mail it to the center. When I got to school I printed it and shared it with the others on the staff. With this encouragement I prepared myself to meet with the children and listen for their concerns.

What happened in Toni's classroom following the events of September 11

On September 12, 2001, when five-year-old Joshua drew a picture of a hurricane, I asked him, *"Tell me about your drawing."* Joshua replied, *"It's a hurricane."*

I wondered if his violent image arose from seeing frightening images on television, and I used a neutral question to let him say what was on his mind:

Toni: *What's happening in your hurricane?*

Joshua: *It hurts people. It knocks down towers.*

Only after this exchange with Joshua did I really believe that feelings about the attack on the Twin Towers could be just beneath the surface in the children's play and work—even among two- to five-year-olds in California. I made sure I read Joshua's dictated story back to him in a rather loud voice, so other children would know it was okay to talk about the towers. And I recommitted myself to paying special attention to this material.

Expressing emotions through the arts

As I observed the children, I reflected on the way I have always felt knit together as I work using paints,

Toni Gross, M.A., has taught young children for 23 years, first as a public school teacher and now, for the last nine years, at Daisy Child Development Center in Oakland, California. (Toni's email– cellostories@hotmail.com)

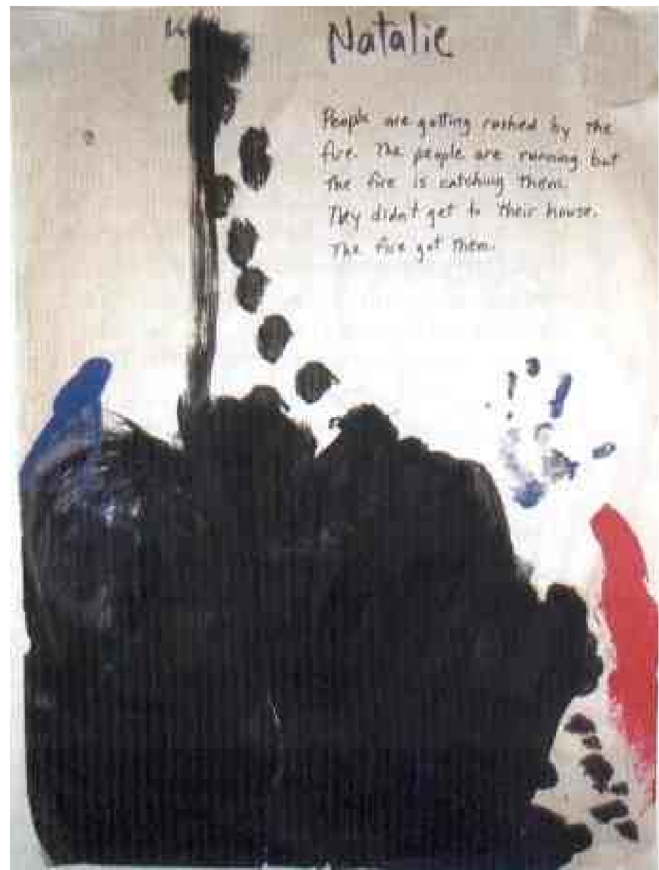
Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, M.A., who taught young children for 32 years, is an early childhood consultant and author. Sydney lives in San Francisco and consults at Daisy. She and Toni have been friends for 28 years. (Sydney's Website— http://home.earthlink.net/~eceteacher/

clay, and drawing materials or playing music. The work makes me feel better. My positive experiences led me to commit myself very early in my teaching to supporting children's expression through all the arts. Another major influence on me was Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*, which spoke passionately of the importance of the creative channel in children as an antidote to the violence in the lives (1963).

My sense of how to work with children's expressions in an open-ended manner began in 1967 when I took a class from Naomi Freilikoff Pile at Bank Street College. (Interestingly, Sydney had taken the same class in 1961). More recently I've learned that if strong feelings are not expressed, they eventually come to result in knots of physical tension and pain. I have brought these understandings into the classroom and out to the playyard.

Paints and clay and markers are always available to the children to help them undo their knotty problems. Using the arts to help us understand and feel better is part of our classroom culture. All the children who chose to use art materials to express their feelings that day after the September 11 attack already were accustomed to using one or more of these materials daily.

A few minutes after my discussion with Joshua, four-year-olds Emma and Emily began a quarrel in the dramatic play area. I saw Emily crying.



Toni: *What's happening with you?*

Emily: *I don't want to be the girl who is burning!*

Toni: (turning to Emma) *Do you want to be the girl who is burning?*

Emma: (drawing back) *No!*

Toni: (noticing that both children look frightened) *Maybe this play is too scary. Maybe you'd like to paint this story?*

Emma had made her hand into a claw, brought her fingers up to the top of the painting, and scratched several long holes down almost to the bottom of the paper.

Emma chose to paint right then; Emily's painting surfaced weeks later. Two-year-old Daniela joined Emma during part of her painting time, but didn't say anything I could hear.

I was astonished at the impact of Emma's painting of a ripped red inferno. Emma had made her hand into a claw, brought her fingers up to the top of the painting, and scratched several long holes down almost to the bottom of the paper. She told me: *"It's the New York fire*." As I carried her painting to the drying line, she called to me across

the room, satisfied, *"It's torn because that's what happened to the tower."*
Exhibiting Emma's shredded painting encouraged other children to express their experiences of wrestling with this shattering event.

Later that day three-year-old Natalie tripped and fell down just before morning cleanup time. She cried and cried. I suggested she might like to paint so she could feel better. She painted with her usual careful and deliberate brush strokes. After lunch and nap, I told her I hadn't had a chance in the morning to talk with her about her painting. *"Do you remember what you were thinking about?"* Without hesitation and with no visible emotions she told me her thoughts, and, with her permission, I wrote them on the painting:

> *"People are getting rushed by the fire. The people are running but the fire is catching them. They didn't get to their house. The fire got them."*

That same day Alexandra (age four) , one of Emma's closest friends, drew a picture and dictated:

> *"This wiggly stuff is like blood because she's locked up in jail because she tried to kill everybody."*

You can always go back and reopen the conversation with a child, who may or may not remember and respond.

I wasn't sure how to respond to this, or if it was connected to the recent tragedies, so I brought this episode to our Reggio Emilia Learning Group, at which time Sydney reminded me that you can always go back and reopen the conversation with a child, who may or may not remember and respond. So, a few days later I asked Alexandra what she had been thinking about when she made her drawing. She answered without hesitation*, "It's because of Emma's painting about the towers."* I began to listen more for children's influences on each other as they built together, co-constructing their understandings of the event, just as adults were doing all over the world in September of 2001.

Fingerpainting the next morning, Emma volunteered a label for her work in words loud and clear: *"It's the fire in New York."* I made sure it went right up on the wall near her first painting and Joshua's drawing. Watching her body, and listening to her voice, she seemed to be checking to see if it was really okay to talk about this. To show her it was okay, I invited nearby children to come and see her work.

A few weeks later Rio (age four) and Joshua built towers of clay and began knocking them down with clay airplanes. Emma made a tower of her own, building it up and smashing it down again and again. All three children made airplane noises and talked about the towers. I asked each one to dictate a story about his or her clay work. Rio chose not to. Here's Emma's dictation:

> *"When the people were running out of the building they couldn't get out. The fire was already there. They saw the airplane was coming and then they hided everywhere. This [fire] couldn't get out. They raced out just in time so they could go home, but everywhere it started to get fire except for the other buildings. They didn't get fire."*

Building towers of clay and smashing them down.

Joshua said, *"This is the bad guy, he got a gun. The gun shooted at the airplane. BOOM! BOOM!"*

Shortly after the Unites States began bombing Afghanistan, Emma drew with markers and said, "These are bad girls. They got into a war with other shooters." Soon after, She awakened from naptime and told me a dream:

> *"I dreamed that there were lots of planes about to crash into Daisy School. But we grabbed all the things in the cubbies, and the things that were the cubbies and left the things on the windows. And we had to take the pictures off the walls, and we had to be careful not to rip. And we went outside the school."*

Expanding support for Emma

I see Emma's mother and father often at arrival or pickup. I made sure to point out her various representations of the Twin Towers to them, and they were shocked and moved by the extent of their daughter's interest in and awareness of this awful subject. About two months after the disaster, I spoke with Emma's mother, asking how she coped at home with this profound and persistent interest of Emma's.

Rather than banning play or art containing violence, adults should help children use these activities to work out an understanding, regain control, and reach some resolution on the violence they see.

Emma's mother told me that she tried to protect her, to keep her from seeing the photos and images on television. In fact, the night of September 11, Emma's family met with others concerned about keeping

their children away from these images. Nonetheless, she said that she and Emma would fight in the mornings for possession of *The New York Times.* Emma never saw the images on TV, but she saw some at the supermarket in the tabloids, and looked in the *Times* for pictures. Her mother said that Emma was making guns out of anything and everything even though Mom was banning them.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin write about the importance of play and art when children are exposed to violent and scary things (1987; Levin 1998). They argue that rather than banning play or art containing violence, adults should help children use these activities to work out an understanding, regain control, and reach some resolution on the violence they see.

With this in mind, I asked Emma's mother to consider changing her position, allowing Emma to make and

paint guns in her house, and accepting her Twin Towers talk and play. I explained that this would permit Mom to discuss these things with Emma and give Emma a feeling of support and protection for her inquiry. Mom agreed. Some weeks later she told me of a change that had resulted: Emma, who draws all the time, had never given arms to the princesses she drew. When the ban on guns was lifted, she made several princesses, and all the princesses now had arms, and always, always in their arms were guns. After an earthquake drill, I noticed Emma and two other children shaking the dollhouse and talking about earthquakes and fires. An hour later I asked Emma if her earthquake and fire play reminded her of the Twin Towers. She replied, clearly and forcefully, *"I want to know about the Towers, and I'm very interested in the fighting."*

The children's conversation continues

Here is an excerpt from a discussion I recorded among Emma, Emily, and Alexandra:

Emily: *That doesn't look nice…*
Emma: *Oooh! You said a bad word* [Note: As many four-year-olds do, Emma confuses phrases with words. The bad "word" is *that doesn't look nice.]*
Emily: *It's not a bad word.*
Alexandra: *No, it's not a bad word. It's just…It's just to you. It's not a bad word.*
Emily: *It's not a bad word, Emma*
Emma: (sounding frightened) *But it's a bad word to me. My mom, if she hears a hate noise, it…she thinks an airplane is going to knock into her.*

Over the next days and weeks five more children joined the ongoing depiction and dialogue about the Twin Towers. One day, right after naptime, Emily (who had, on September 12, fought with Emma about being the burnt girl) was finally ready to paint the fire. She told me about her morning's painting The New York Fire:

> *"My grandpa lives in New York. I was afraid that he would get burnt. But he did not. He was at home. He got out of the building fast. I was lucky. My mom was lucky too."*

Later I learned from Emily's mother that Grandpa wasn't anywhere near the fire, but clearly Emily was concerned. On the same day, Matthew (five), Bryce (five), and Benjamin (four) painted together, and then Matthew told me:

> *"The airplane came down on the building and made a big fire. My mother saw it on the news. Also two big airplanes crashed into two big buildings. My mommy was crying and all the people died in the buildings. And that wasn't in Oakland. It was a different place. A different town."*

Bryce painted on November 20, and dictated, *"It's like when the plane crashed into the building. And it got fire on the back."* Explaining another painting, Bryce wrote another catastrophic story:

> *"The monster turned the city to ice. And no one could move. Not even a magical. And the octopus came to save someone. It's the Daisy children. And the grownups are safe. They are all safe."*

When I discussed this with Diane Levin she said that Bryce had rewritten the catastrophe to reflect his changing perception of danger (Levin 1998. Bryce had worked through his fears sufficiently so that he could paint a disaster in which he created safety for all the children and grown-ups at Daisy. (See Clemens 1996, chapter 7 for more on remythologizing.)

These were the events in the classroom. A lot of the preparation for this work came over the years that preceded September 11, 2001, and we have thought long and hard about it, hoping it will help others in years to come.

Listening

For years I wrote down the children's words when they painted. Now that I've begun to document their work, to make tape recordings of their talk and listen to them, to photograph their work and study it, I revisit the children's work *differently* with them, really listening to what they say when they dictate and telling them, often in their own words, what I understand them to be saying. Because I slowed down, I see the children more clearly.

Documenting

I began documenting children's work in July 1999, after thinking about it for several years. I visited the one hundred languages of children exhibit, attended a couple of Sydney's workshops about Reggio Emilia, and admired the level of the Italian children' thinking and their representation in media. But, even after I joined the San Francisco Reggio Emilia Learning Group, I felt a lot of resistance and hesitation about trying this process. It seemed likely to take too much time, use too much technology, and further burden my already difficult job.

Facilitating

What had we learned from the Italians to explain why their children thought so clearly? Facilitating children's searches for meaning had always seemed beyond my reach. But when I started documenting children's work, I began to feel more and more comfortable with this crucial role. Sydney kept holding in front of me documentation examples from both Italian and American classrooms showing the possibility that documentation would assist me in helping children grasp the uses of material and human resources to find and express their meanings.. She said I'd reflect more clearly upon the children's learning behavior and upon my teaching behavior as well if I documented. As I watched other members of the Reggio Emilia Learning Group make their own attempts at documentation, I rose to the challenge.

Lessons learned

Everyone in the classroom learned through this experience—teacher and children.

What did I learn?

Before I began picking up on children's concerns about September 11, I was afraid other adults—staff and parents—would be critical of me for encouraging the children to keep such frightening information alive in the classroom. I worried especially about parents, like Emma's who believed they had protected their children from the terrifying images.

I've learned that taking risks allows a great many important feelings to come out; children have to know that their most important and painful concerns can be

Children have to know that their most important and painful concerns can be expressed, played out, and discussed in the classroom.

expressed, played out, and discussed in the classroom. And I'm learning to revise my image of the child. For many years I've been working on seeing the child as full, rich in experience, not as empty and waiting for adults to fill him or her up. When Emma spoke so directly of her desire to know about the towers and the fighting, I experienced her not as a helpless little child, but as a powerful human being.

I've learned to follow the children's agenda. I have been careful to do no more and no less with the Twin Towers material than I do with any other important work or play. I conversed about September 11 only with small groups of children and only when their art material or play came around to the subject. I wanted their work to be their own and not a response to my own heightened interest in this subject. Children show by the seriousness in their voices and their facial expressions that they feel secure and grown up exploring important issues. I feel they need this as much as they need food, love, shelter, and exercise.

I now know that documenting holds open an invitation to children and parents to join the discussion. As I documented more and more in all areas of the classroom, as more and more children were represented (11 of the 18 had expressed themselves on this subject by March 2002), I felt greater courage to continue. I have spoken with all of their parents about this work.

I've learned (and I've been amazed) to see how aware very young children are of big events. Allowing them to talk freely is another way of reinforcing my reassurances that we will care for them. Further, the presence of the paintings and dictations on the classroom walls underlines for them, as well as for me, that we all—kids and grownups—have permission to talk with each other when there's a problem. In this way, instead of frightening and overwhelming us, our feelings become understandable, manageable, and part of what we think and talk about.

Where to take this learning

The work I'm doing now with children is much deeper than ever before because I'm not doing it alone. Sydney, Yuko Marshall, Eva Baharona-Stewart, Carolee Fucigna, and Melissa Bowen join together with me each month in our Reggio Emilia Learning Group to consider documentation each has brought from her work with young children in an effort to strengthen our practice. These meetings have made it possible for me to engage in deeper dialogue

Some Good Daily Practices to Keep You and the Children Ready for Special Challenges

- Identify people who can be of help to you in your teaching, both with theory and practical solutions. Don't hesitate to ask when you need help.
- Validate different approaches to painting: scratching, flicking, spattering, and fingerpainting (even at the easel). When Emma tore her Twin Towers painting she was already familiar with these processes.
- Invite children who have expressed an idea to portray it again in a second and third medium. When you exhibit these works together children will feel deeply validated in their expression and parents will feel more informed about their children's thinking and feeling
- Sit down, relax, and use a soft, slow voice when talking with a child about his artwork. Do this even when you feel hurried.
- Stay neutral when reopening a discussion with a child after some time has passed, creating in your teaching voice a possibility without a demand.
- Provide children open access to unstructured art materials every day so they can express themselves (Pile 1973; Clemens 1991)
- Keep in mind that children are very often finely tuned to each other's thoughts and artwork. Expect, and look for, work that spins off other children' art and stories. Look for how art and play facilitate supportive relationships and contribute to a general feeling of safety in the classroom. Show the children how their classmates honor their work.
- Support free expression and disclosure at all time. Children take their cues from you about whether or not a topic can be openly discussed in their center or school. We adults need always to be on the side of free expression and disclosure.
- Wonder and check out if there are more meaning beneath the first explanations that children tell you as they label their artwork. Use neutral, open-ended questions to elicit deeper talk about artwork. On the first go-round you might say, "What's happening in this picture?" This allows a child to describe the colors she mixed, the shapes she made, the journey she took, or the object or person she represented. From then on, you can ask, "Can you tell me more about that?"

with my children, their parents, and increasingly with my colleagues.

I've learned that the children need this process, even when information is violent and scary. They need the important adults in their lives to support them in their efforts (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987; Levin 1998). More than half of the children in my group have chosen to make art or conversation about September 11. Through looking at each other's work and listening to dictations about it, a community of acceptance has evolved. References to the Twin Towers come up in many contexts. For Emma, and for each child, there is a growing comfort in the idea that she can get her feelings out through media and that she will be heard.

I've learned that there is no protection from this kind of news except talking and listening to people one trusts. Talking with parents from September 11 on, I have heard about "protecting the children" from the news. I believe more than ever that young children should not be exposed to repeated images of carnage on television. But a tragedy of this proportion affects everything in our adult society. We all carry our grief and fear and concern for justice and fair play in our bodies, and we wonder how this could have come to pass. The children are intimately tuned in to us. I'm at a loss to answer their question, "Why did they do that?" The best thing we can do is reassure the children that we will take care of them, and that they need not figure out how to take care of themselves in the face of such huge, threatening news.

What are the children learning?

Of all the children in my class, Emma has been the most expressive about September 11. At the age of four, Emma has demonstrated a fierce desire to grapple honestly with events that have terrified her family and people all over the world.

Her artwork permitted her to symbolize the big feelings that were hurting her inside and opened the door to conversation with me, and subsequently with her parents and her peers. Through this work she has come to trust that her curiosity and inquiry will not be suppressed. I believe that having the freedom and support at school to explore this very difficult issue opened doors for Emma's continuing passionate engagement with life. Her learning exemplifies the possibilities for children to come through difficult times in good shape, choosing from "the hundred languages" within them to explore what lies heavy on their hearts.

Two timely resources on this topic…

What Happened to the World? Helping Children Cope in Turbulent Times *by J. Greenman.* Helps caregivers understand and support children coping with catastrophic events. **NAEYC order #217/$4.**

What Happened to the World? Facilitators Guide *by R. Russell and J. Greenman.* Helps adults come together and share their reactions and insights in support of children's efforts to cope with tragedy. **NAEYC order #218/$5.**

Both resources published by Bright Horizons.

References

Ashton-Warner, S. 1963. *Teacher*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Carlsson-Paige, N., & D.D. Levin. 1987. *The war play dilemma: Balancing needs and values in the early childhood classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Clemens, S.G. 1991. *Art in the classroom: Making every day special.* Young Children 46 (2): 4-11.

Clemens, S.G. 1996. *Pay attention to the children: Lessons for teachers and parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner.* Napa, CA: Rattle OK Press.

Clemens, S.G. 1998. *Discussing the news with 3- to 7-year-olds: What to do?*

Levin, D.E. 1998 Play with violence: Understanding and responding effectively. In *Play from birth to twelve and beyond: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings,* eds. D. Fromberg & D. Bergen. New York: Garland.

Levin, D.E. 1998. *Remote control childhood? Combating the hazards of media culture.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Pile, N.F. 1973. *Art experiences for young children.* New York: Macmillan

For Further Reading

Deskin, G., & G. Steckler. 1996. *When nothing makes sense: Disaster, Crisis, and their effects on children.* Minneapolis, MN: Fairview

Engel, B.S. 1995. *Considering children's art: Why and how to value their works*. Washington, DC : NAEYC

Marshall, S. 1968. *An experiment in education.* Toronto: Cambridge University Press.

Matthews, J. 1999. *The art of childhood and adolescence: The construction of meaning*. London: Falmer

Smith, N.R., C. Fucigna, M. Kennedy, & L. Lord. Experience and art 2d ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Read, H. [1943] 1958. *Education through art.* New York: Pantheon.

Richardson, E.S. 1964. *In the early world*. New York: Pantheon

Copyright 2002 by Toni Gross and Sydney Gurewitz Clemens (73 Arbor Street, San Francisco, CA 94131)

This article and many more excellent early childhood resources are available on the web at: www.thelearningcollaborative.org 703-637-0005